Towards Understanding Interpretation

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This paper is based on another work by the author entitled, Teaching the Skill of Interpretation: A Curriculum Development Guide for EFL Educators(1988). In this guide, various aspects related to the teaching of interpretation were analyzed to assist in developing an effective curriculum for interpretation courses. Two courses in Japanese to English and English to Japanese interpretation offered at Trident College of Languages in Nagoya, Japan, provided the context in which to research this subject. These courses were introduced to meet the growing need for individuals who can competently interpret between one or more languages. The lack of a comprehensive theoretical foundation of interpretation with which to design the curriculum prompted the author to examine what specifically is needed in order to teach interpretation effectively. One component of that analysis -- a tentative description of several fundamental characteristics of interpretation - is the basis for the paper being presented here.

Introduction

To illustrate why it seems necessary to write an entire paper on the subject of understanding interpretation, imagine a teacher attending a language teaching conference where various educational presentations are being offered. Though not a trained interpreter or interpretation teacher, this teacher is interested in learning more about this field, and so enters a classroom where technical vocabulary related to these subjects is flying fast and furiously. Hearing words like *translation*, *interpretation*, *consecutive* and *simultaneous interpretation*, *NL* to *FL* and vice a versa, *SL* to *TL* this teacher, still curious but now slightly overwhelmed by the new vocabulary, asks the question, "What do the words 'interpreting' and 'interpretation' really mean?" Possibly, silence envelopes the room with no one being able to answer the question because they themselves do not know the answers to it. Or perhaps, everyone chimes in at once offering a veritable smorgasbord of descriptions to choose from.

Of course, various descriptions of the nature of interpretation can be found easily by asking the average person on the street. For example, one might hear, "Interpretation changes spoken language in one language into spoken language in other languages." Yet, are these general descriptions of interpretation adequate enough for the educator teaching others the skill of interpreting between languages? To answer this question an attempt was made to investigate theories of interpretation. If these theories indicated that interpreting between languages was a simple skill, then general descriptions of it may indeed suffice, However, finding few relevant sources on interpretation theory necessitated turning to a related area, the theories of translation. This done, it became apparent that translation and, by logical inference, interpretation were complex skills requiring detailed descriptions before being able to be explained fully. Thus, the interpretation teacher seems to be in need of a coherent, practical description of interpretation in order to teach this skill adequately. To meet this need, a number of descriptions of

translation have been combined and adapted into one possible way of looking at interpretation —— as assumptions about the nature of interpretation. Of these numerous descriptions, five of them are proposed here as prerequisites to an understanding of interpretation. The author assumes full responsiblity for these adaptations and hopes that these descriptions of interpretation accurately reflect the intentions of the translation theorists who originally produced them.

Describing Interpretation

These assumptions characterize interpretation as 1) a semiotic activity, 2) working with complex verbal signs, 3) which are called texts and have three functions. Also, it is assumed that 4) interpretation is a process, and 5) that this process, called interlingual interpretation, always results in some loss of meaning.

Assumption 1 interpretation is a semiotic activity

Semiotics is the scientific study of signs, sign systems or structures, sign processes and sign functions.[1] Therefore, interpretation is basically a form of verbal sign-reading.[2] These signs can be anything which carry some form of meaning within a culture; in this case, sounds combined in various ways to form words, sentences, etc. Semiotics recognizes the fact that these signs in the form of sounds, (and when combined with each other, words and sentences) carry more than just their linguistic meanings alone. They also possess extra-linguistic meaning(s). Thus, a busy businessman hurrying past an ice cream store who hears the words' á double ice cream cone' may understand this to mean in the linguistic sense of the words, two scoops of a flavored frozen confection sitting on top of a hard baked pastry which has been formed into a conical shape. The businessman, as a non-participant with the cone, is not interested in its purpose. However, to other people involved with ice cream in some way, the words á double ice cream cone' can mean various things extra-linguistically. To the ice-cream and ice-cream cone manufacturers these words might mean a profitable source of income, to a housewife with young children possibly a potential source of dirty clothes and perhaps a frivolous expense, and likely, to the children a delicious treat.[3] This is true, as Sapir has stated because language is a guide to social reality. Our experiences are reflected in our language. That same language then goes on to influence the way we view our world and future experiences. Thus, our experiences, "he asserts, are largely determined by the language habits of the community, and each separate structure represents a separate reality."[4] Continuing on this same subject he says:

> No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.[5]

Further support for this concept of languge as possessing linguistic and extra-linguistic components is found in a theory of Soviet semiotician, Juri Lotman. He maintains that language is a primary modeling system firmly grounded in the culture in which it is used. Literature and art both are both regarded as secondary modeling systems derived from language. Quoting Lotman:

> No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture, and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language.[6]

The necessity for interpreters to view their work as primarily semiotic sign-reading activities rather than purely linguistic ones is succinctly summarized by translation theorist Susan Bassnett– McGuire

in the following passage:

> Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the [interpreter] treats the text [spoken speech] in isolation from the culture at his peril.[7]

Assumption 2 Verbal signs are complex

The verbal signs used when interpreting are multifaceted and an understanding of their complexities is suggested before one attempts to interpret between languages. Verbal signs can be described in at least the following ways: 1) linguistic or extra-linguistic signs, 2) reference or sense signs, 3) standardized or non-standardized signs, 4) signs defined by length and function, and 5) signs as texts.

Linguistic and extra-linguistic signs

Linguistic signs are signs that carry only their common dictionary meanings. For example, the linguistic sign *fox* as a noun is a mammal related to the dogs and the wolves, having a pointed snout and a bushy tail.[9] As an ***extra-linguistic sign*** which can have multiple associated meanings to the people who hear it, *fox* might mean a vicious animal that ate the family cat one night *or* a poor defenseless little creature chased over hill and dale by hounds, horses and hunters.

Reference and sense signs

Reference signs are related to linguistic signs in that they have meaning when isolated. For example, the sign *fox* as a common noun carries its common meaning of a mammal related to the dogs and the wolves. They differ from linguistic signs in that reference signs point to or name linguistic signs. So, the linguistic sign *fox* becomes *George the fox* as a reference sign. ***Sense signs*** define the reference sign in greater detail. *The cute fox at the zoo* thus gives more information about the reference, *George*.[10]

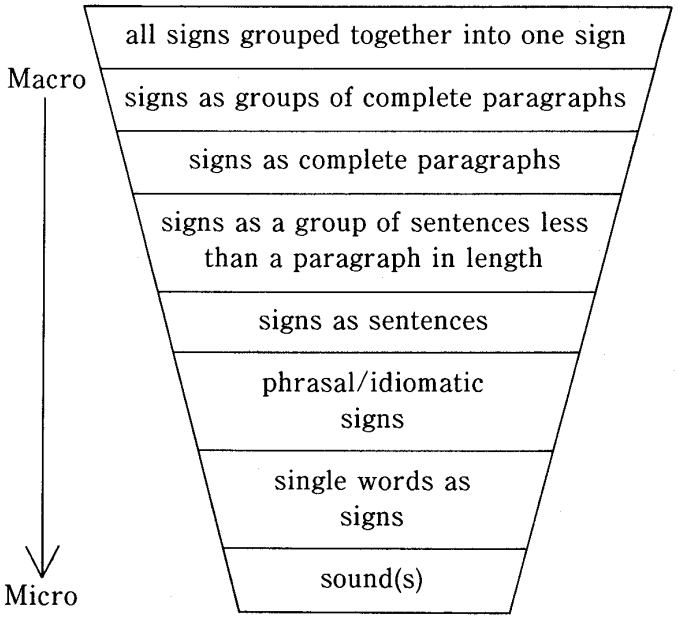
Standardized and non-standardized

Standardized signs are signs which share the same meaning in the languages being interpreted. These signs are always used in the same situations by the same kinds of persons in both languages. Examples of standardized language are technical terms, common metaphors, idioms, proverbs, public notices, social phrases, expletives, standard ways of stating the date or time of the day, giving dimensions and stating the date or time in the usual way.[11] The verbal sign *fox* would be easily reproducible as a standardized sign in Japanese by a Japanese/English interpreter if it was understood that this sign was spoken by American researchers speaking to their Japanese counterparts. These people, when speaking about a mammal related to the dogs and the wolves, having a pointed snout and a bushy tail always use the sign *fox* (or its scientific equivalent) which in Japanese is *Kitsune*. However, if the sign *fox* was a ***non-standardized sign*** (and it can be depending on the situation it is used in) the matter of interpretation becomes more difficult. Non-standardized signs are any signs that have more than one correct equivalent in both languages in any given situation. This sign used conversationally by American males not researching animals in any conventional sense of the word could possibly mean a mammal related to the dogs and the wolves with a pointed snout and bushy tail if they were talking about hunting, in which case, the Japanese sign would be the same one as above. An attractive woman is

another possibility if they were discussing human females and their attributes. This *fox* would then need to be rendered in Japanese as *bijin,* (beautiful girl/woman).

Sign length and ability to convey meaning

Signs can also be viewed in terms of their ***length,*** a physical characteristic and their ***ability to convey meaning,*** a functional characteristic. A sign's length and communicative ability can be broken down before being interpreted from the multiple sign level (macro scale) to the singular sign (micro scale) in incrementally smaller units. Each unit can be called a ***unit or interpretation*** ro ***UI.***[12] This is shown below:



Fox, of course, falls into the single word as a sign category. Whenever single signs on the micro level fail to provide enough contextual information for the interpreter to complete the interpretation he/she can move to the next macro level in an attempt to understand the meaning of the sign. As was shown earlier, *fox,* produced in a conversational setting by non-scientists, has various meanings as a single micro word sign. At the slightly more macro phrasal/idiomatic level, however, the wider context provides enough clues to the interpreter for him/her to easily complete the task at hand as in *She's a fox!!* The interpreter chooses the Japanese *bijin* (beautiful girl/woman) to replace *fox* successfully conveying the meaning intended by the speakers. Conversely, if a unit of interpretation is taken from the macro level where many signs have been grouped together into one sign, the interpreter usually understands the ideas needing to be interpreted but has too much context with which to work. This usually results in the interpreter experiencing difficulty choosing the reference sign(s) to begin the interpretation with or the order in which to present the signs in the interpretation. Moving to a less macro level reduces the number of signs in the unit of interpretation, aiding this decision-making process. The ideal length for a unit of interpretation is always one that is just long enough to convey meaning of the sign(s) involved. The shorter the better.

Signs as texts

The language providing the verbal signs (sounds, words, sentences, etc.) to be interpreted is refer-

red to as the ***source language*** or ***SL.*** The language receiving verbal signs from the source language (SL) is referred to as the ***target language*** or ***TL.***[13] Therefore, the source language is always interpreted into the target language. In the example given above, *fox,* is the source language sign which can also be called the SL ***text.*** Text is used here as a verbal sign rather than as a written one. After the interpretation process is completed the SL text becomes the TL interpretation, the Japanese *bijin.* If interpreting from Japanese to English, the SL text would be *bijin* and the TL interpretation, *fox.*

Assumption 3 Texts(Verbal signs) have three functions

Every language has the following three functions: the ***expressive, informative*** and ***vocative*** functions.[14] These functions explain the way we all, as language speakers, use language. Speakers of all languages use texts (verbal signs) to 1) express themselves creatively, 2) inform others about something in an objective way, and 3) affect others in some way.

The expressive function

The expressive function is ***speaker-centered.*** A speaker uses figurative language focused on the 'first person' (only the speaker really knows what he or she is saying for sure). "I'm really feeling kind-'ve spacey and a little fried from that kind of thing right now, if you know what I mean.", a speaker might say in an expressive text when talking about his recent distaste for hunting foxes.

The informative function

In contrast, the informative function is ***neutral.*** Factual language in the 'third person' (from an observer's point of view) is used by a speaker to convey information without creatively enhancing it. "The nose of a fox generally is referred to as its snout in scientific circles.", said the professor to his students in an informative text.

The vocative function

Lastly, the vocative function is ***listener-centered.*** Persuasive or compelling language is presented in the 'second person' (from the listener's point of view) by a speaker to influence others in some way. "Foxes need you to save them from destruction ! How would you feel if your home was destroyed by a bulldozer? Terrible, right? Exactly !!! That's why we need your money to stop this senseless destruction...", smooth-talked the radio announcer in a vocative text.

Combined functions

These functions of language in texts are not mutually exclusive. Any given text (a verbal sign or signs) can be a combination of these different functions. It is possible to see these functions combined in something even as common as a person's name. A child's name represents the expressive function to the parents who choose it. "I want my next son to be named after his great-grandfather Edwina Ralph Fink.", intoned Dad Fink. Unfortunately, to listeners unfamiliar with great-grandfather Fink's fine qualities, that name may be somewhat shocking, to say the least. So, Dad Fink may be called upon by Mom Fink to have mercy, and using the vocative function of language, consider the effect the name will have on others before choosing it. "But Dear... what will the neighbors think? Won't everyone call him a sissy?", replied the shocked Mom Fink. "You're quite right, Dear. That name just won't do at all so let's

call him Charles the Second. He'll be respected by one and all then." offered Father. In the end, regardless of the name bestowed, others will use boy Fink's name to objectively distinguish him from, say, a rock. The name used in this way is part of the informative function.

Concerns for interpreters

The point of this example is to show how language (expressed as texts) can be more complicated than it appears to be initially. To prevent interpreting errors, interpreters need to be aware not only of the different forms these texts can take (discussed as signs in assumption two) but also of the three functions any text can have, as well as, the intention(s) of the speaker who is producing the texts to be interpreted. To misunderstand and/or take any of these factors for granted (ie. when an interpreter guesses the speaker's text is persuasive when it actually is expressive, etc.) will cause the SL text to be inadequately and more importantly, inadvertantly replaced in the TL text. Furthermore, the interpreter must understand that it is possible to consciously alter the function of the SL text as it is being interpreted into the TL. An SL text produced for self-expression can take on, with the interpreter's manipulation, an entirely different function if so desired.

Assumption 4 Interpretation is a process

Interpretation is best understood as a process, rather than as a product that is generated.[15] While interpretation as an activity produces a product (the interpretation in another language) it is due to the process of interpretation that the product (again, the interpretation) could be produced at all.

Interpretation as a product

In the past, to interpret meant that one understood the grammar and syntax of the languages being used and then applied this understanding to produce an interpretation. This view of interpretation, which is extremely limited in scope, looked at interpretation as a mechanical, non-creative, (therefore) secondary activity performable by anyone who knows another language to some extent.

Interpretation as a process

What is needed, however, is an understanding of interpretation as a process with clearly defined steps of action. These steps have both creative and mechanical (most theorists prefer the use of 'scientific' here) aspects to them. This approach views interpretation as a primary activity requiring specialists who are knowledgable about the process of interpretation and capable of doing more than reproducing linguistic structures between languages.

Assumption 5 Interlingual interpretation and loss of meaning

Interpretation is the spoken form of interlingual translation.[16] ***Interlingual interpretation*** is a process that replaces verbal signs in one language with verbal signs in another language. The word *replaces* means *substitutes* —— nothing more, nothing less.

The problem of equivalence

To replace or substitute signs does not imply that the SL text and the TL text share ***equivalence***. Signs are equivalent (theoretically, at least) when they share identical meanings and produce identical

feelings and images in both the SL and the TL. If they do not, then ***loss of meaning*** attributable to the interpretation has resulted. These signs, once interpreted, may or not have equivalence with each other for two reasons. First, since every language is based upon a different cultural reality, no two experiences can be exactly the same. Secondly, the original function of the SL text: expressive, informational or vocative, largely determines the degree of equivalence the SL and TL texts will share. Depending upon the situation, a loss of meaning between interpreted texts can either be a negative or positive by-product of the interpretation process.

Culturally-based loss of meaning

On the first point, if the two languages being interpreted have developed out of nearly identical cultural situations the signs will be nearly equivalent in meaning with one another. Dissimilar cultural backgrounds will cause the interpretation to be less equivalent.

The American verbal sign *rice* when linguistically replaced in Japanese is *gohan* or *raisu*. Linguistically they are equivalent in meaning but extra-linguistically they are worlds apart in experience. Both countries grow, harvest and eat the starchy edible seed this plant produces. Yet the image each sign conjures up in their respective countries is vastly different. American *rice* generally is long-grained, light in taste and cooks up rather dry and fluffy with each grain of rice easily separable from the others. It does not stick to spoons or forks easily. In contrast, Japanese gohan or raisu is short-grained, richer in taste and moister when cooked than American rice. It sticks to everything. To achieve equivalence or near-equivalence of texts betwen languages with dissimilar cultural experiences it is necessary, as was shown above, to add extra signs or more precisely, words to bring the two backgrounds closer together. The interpretation produced then becomes longer and is no longer a word for word exchange.

Function-based loss of meaning

Secondly, the function of the SL text will affect the equivalence of the signs being interpreted. Generally speaking, all SL texts lose meaning to some degree when interpreted into the TL. The extent of this loss can be directly attributable to a text's function or combination of functions.

The greatest amount of loss

Expressive SL texts lose the most meaning of the three functions since these texts are speaker-centered and use language creatively. The first problem in interpreting expressive texts is knowing what the speaker's verbal signs actually mean in the SL. The sentence-length sign: *Bill really blew Tom away* has more than one meaning in the SL. It may mean, that Tom was really emotionally surprised or shocked or saddened or a combination of all three by something Bill did or said. Or, it could mean that Bill gunned down Tom and killed him using a gun or rifle. Possibly, but not likely, it might mean that Bill turned a gigantic electric fan on Tom's person and literally blew him away to some other place. If the SL text's meaning can be discerned, it is possible for the interpreter to replace it into the TL. Yet, it can be very difficult to comprehend the SL text's meaning and convey the exact feelings and images that the speaker experienced when uttering that SL text. Obviously, this causes a loss of meaning in the TL.

Variable amounts of loss

The next greatest loss of meaning occurs in vocative texts and its extent depends on the cultural differences between the two languages. The vocative SL text *Back off, buster.* has, let's, say, a certain culturally-based aurà about it. Unlike the previous expressive SL text example, the meaning of *Back off, buster!!!* is commonly understood by SL speakers if used in America. It is used to strongly warn, admonish or recommend to another person that the the course of action they are currently pursuing will lead to no good. It conveys impatience, irritation and probably anger. This meaning can easily be interpreted into the TL. So, the American SL text *Back off, buster!!!* becomes most commonly, the Japanese TL text *Yamero!!!* What usually cannot be rendered in the TL text alone though is the SL text's image or feeling. For purposes of illustration only, assume that *Back off, buster!!!* carries with it an image of a truck drver lifting his foot off of the accelerator pedal as a first step to bringing his truck to a stop. In this case, it is as if the text originated with a passenger who, while riding in a truck, said *Back off, buster!!!* to the driver because the truck was careening down a slope heading for an untimely demise. In addition, there is an implication in the SL text that if the action is not stopped immedately a physical or verbal fight may result. *Yamero!!!* while conveying stong feelings of annoyance, carries no such images or implications although it achieves basically the same effect —— that is stopping the offensive action. The potential loss of the SL's image and implication as a result of the text's vocative function, while important, is not as extensive as an expressive text's would be since the original text's meaning can at least be replaced somewhat equivalently in the TL.

The least amount of loss

Finally, language used objectvely to inform others about something suffers the least amount of meaning loss. The SL text *My index finger hurts* means that the finger next to my thumb is causing me some sort of physical pain or distress. In Japanese, the text can be replaced with exactly the same meaning, image and feeling as in *(Watashi no) hito sashi, yubi ga itai desu.* The only apparent way meaning could be lost between these texts is if pain or levels of pain tolerance were defined differently in the SL and TL and TL culures. In that case, any loss of meaning would be liked to cultural causes not language functions.

Conclusion

Now is a good time to return to the scenario of the curious but slightly overwhelmed teacher as presented in the introduction. Having learned about a few of the basic assumptions characterizing interpretation from this paper, this teacher may now feel confident enough to attend presentations on this subject and discuss its basic points with those more knowledgable about interpretation. Still, there are many more areas of interpretation waiting to be explored. The tools an interpreter can use to understand a text's meaning and the speaker's intentions would be a logical place to continue this inquiry. Building upon that, a look at interpretation as a process of decoding and recoding would be appropriate. The artistic and scientific aspects of the interpreter's work could then be examined in depth after this. Further consideration could be given to the all remaning aspects of interpretation and interpretation procedures.

Notes

1. Hawkes, *Stucturalism and Semiotics*, (London : 1977).
2. The basic idea of interpretation as a semiotic activity was adapted from material presented in Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London : Methuen & Co., 1980), pp. 13-38.
3. Adapted from Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford : Pergamon Pree Ltd., 1982), p. 5.
4. Bassnett-McGuire (1980 : 13)
5. Sapir quoted in Bassnett-McGuire (1980 : 13)
6. Lotman quoted in Bassnett-McGuire (1980 : 14)
7. Bassnett-McGuire (1980 : 14)
8. This assumption was adapted from material presented in Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford : Pergamon Press Ltd., 1982)
9. All dictionary definitions in this paper are from *The American Heritage Dictonary of the English Languge* (New York : Dell Publishing, 1978)
10. See Newmark (1982 : 135-136)
11. See Newmark (1982 : 16) for more on standardized and non-standardized signs.
12. Adapted from Newmark (1982 : 140)
14. This assumption was adapted from material presented in Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford : Pergamon Press Ltd., 1982), pp. 12-15.
15. This assumption was adapted from material presented in Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford : Pergamon Press Ltd., 1982) and Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London : Methuen & Co., 1980)
16. Adapted from Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London : Methuen & Co., 1980), p. 14., pp. 23-37.
    Also, Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford : Pergamon Press Ltd., 1982), pp. 14-15.

Refrences

Bassnett-McGuire, Susan, *Translation Studies* (London : Methuen & Co., 1980)
Newmark, Peter *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford : Pergamon Press Ltd., 1982)